Mental Health Resource Guide for State Policymakers

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a significant impact on the nation's mental health. Fortunately, this global pandemic has also placed a spotlight on both the long-standing challenges in providing mental health services and the programs, policies, interventions, and legal remedies that have proven most effective in addressing those challenges.

As the pandemic entered its second year, The Council of State Governments (CSG) embarked on a nine-month partnership with The Commonwealth Fund to assemble this Mental Health Resource Guide for State Policymakers. The goal of the project was to highlight the challenges and solutions across these four focus areas in mental health policy:

- **Social isolation and loneliness**
- **Maternal mental health**
- **Social determinants of mental health**
- **Mental health insurance parity**

To inform the content of this resource guide, CSG formed a 19-member advisory group made up of state legislators from six states, state executive branch health officials from eight additional states, and subject-matter experts in each focus area. During a series of meetings in the spring and summer of 2021, the group heard presentations about existing research findings related to the challenges in each area and shared strategies for addressing them. The discussions were informed by the work of the CSG research team, which produced extensive research and policy scans for each focus area.

With oversight from The Commonwealth Fund and input from other stakeholders, CSG policy analysts and researchers drew on information gleaned during the advisory group sessions, those extensive summaries, and additional research to produce the series of briefs that comprise this resource guide. Each focus area section includes:

- A policy brief that succinctly defines the issue, considers the policy challenges, and reviews the menu of legislative, programmatic, and other opportunities available to policymakers based on previously enacted successful policies

- A brief on approaches to data collection and analysis that advises policymakers on strategies to build research that is focused on the most effective interventions and that addresses how to emulate successful programs and how to implement experimental research designs for new programs

- A case study brief highlighting a successful program, intervention, initiative, or state law designed to address a particular negative outcome, often within a specific community, that has been championed by state policymakers or others

Common Themes and Key Takeaways

It was clear from the start of the project that none of these focus areas existed in a vacuum. Each was linked to one another, to the common challenges that have long plagued mental health and health care policy, and to many current concerns, from the pandemic to social and health equity.

Across the spectrum of society, every population has experienced mental health challenges due to the pandemic, including:

Family members who have experienced the grief of losing a loved one

Young people cut off from in-person school, social activities, and traditional rites of passage

Parents and guardians confronting a lack of child care, oversight of online learning, and other new challenges in the home

Older adults deprived of family visits and sometimes suffering declining health alone in nursing homes

Essential workers struggling daily to keep up in overburdened health care facilities

Individuals who have lost jobs or experienced economic hardship amidst the shutdowns

Communities of color, where the pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on health

The pandemic has caused increases in mental distress, anxiety, and depression as well as increases in substance use disorders and suicide. Climbing out of individual and societal dark places will require mustering all the mental health resources available. Unfortunately, the nation is confronting a severe shortage of mental health providers.

In addition to strategies to address those workforce needs, this resource guide highlights ways to stretch existing resources and expand the universe of those dedicated to identifying and addressing mental health challenges. From expanding telehealth psychiatric services to incorporating mental health screening capabilities and interventions everywhere from schools, senior centers, and workplaces to primary care providers, hospital emergency departments, and law enforcement communities.

State policymakers can do a lot to address mental health needs. Each has an important role to play in areas such as:

BUILDING CAPACITY
States can support efforts to train providers, teachers, community health workers, and others to address mental health needs. They can champion programs like Senior Reach, which is training individuals to help older adults who may need emotional support, and Building Strong Brains Tennessee, a statewide initiative committing state resources to expand the understanding of brain science and the long-term impact of adverse experiences during childhood.

REQUIRING INCLUSIVE DATA COLLECTION AND PROGRAM DESIGN
State policymakers can incorporate data collection into policies to help them better understand the effects of mental health challenges on various communities, disparities in care, and efficacy of interventions.

CULTURALLY TAILORING INITIATIVES
States can try specific interventions to reach populations with unique challenges and address health equity considerations. The Family Spirit program, for example, is a home visit intervention for Native American teenage mothers.

TAKING HOLISTIC APPROACHES
Policymakers can encourage collaborative care and value-based care models, take a "health in all policies" approach to their activities, continue to enforce mental health parity laws, require generally accepted standards of care in mental health, and work toward the broader integration of mental health care with primary care.

RECONFIGURING HEALTH INFRASTRUCTURE
Changes to insurance and provider payment policies may be required to make many of these holistic approaches a reality. Current systems are not equipped to accommodate some innovations such as mother-baby psychiatric units.

EXPANDING SOCIAL SAFETY NET
Many families might benefit from expanding the social safety net to include guaranteed parental leave. Policymakers can encourage flexibilities under Medicaid to provide greater access to services. The program can be a good proving ground when it comes to testing strategies to address issues in maternal mental health, social determinants of mental health, and mental health parity.

TAKING SOCIETAL APPROACHES
Policymakers can work with stakeholders to identify ways to promote the cohesiveness of neighborhoods and prevent the kinds of adverse experiences that can impact the mental health of multiple generations.

ENSURING SUSTAINABILITY
Longstanding, multi-generational challenges in mental health care require a commitment to policies and programs over time. Policymakers can provide ongoing fiscal and political support to ensure a lasting impact. They can enlist the help and collaboration of multiple sectors of government and diverse stakeholders in these endeavors.

As the nation begins to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the strategies contained within this resource guide can help policymakers address the mental health challenges that have united many Americans during this time, despite differences in age, race, identity, geography, political leaning, or cultural affiliation. These strategies — from the simplest to the most complex — can be an important step forward to further connecting individuals and communities, recognizing the importance of mental health to a collective future.

CSG The Council of State Governments